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A Downtown Reborn

With few resources, but lots of motivation, Greenville shows how an aging city can renew itself.

These days, downtown Greenville bursts with growth. On the west side of the Town Commons, the new Greene Street Bridge stretches across the Tar River, leading the way onto Evans Street, the city's main thoroughfare. Farther down, spicy aromas waft from Chico's Mexican Restaurant. From the heart of downtown rise East Carolina University, its Brody School of Medicine, and Pitt County Memorial Hospital.

Playing on the color in the city name, locals today call Greenville the "Emerald City," but for a long time, not much glittered about the town of 65,000. Tobacco fields nearby tell of a place that grew out of an economic market that, after the 1960s, was long past its peak. It seemed to some that the community had lost the way, but downtown Greenville found its saving grace.



PHOTOGRAPHS: VINCE LUPO



top, left: Mayor Don Parrott (left) and Don Edwards (right), president of Uptown Greenville and owner of several local businesses, work hand-in-hand to make the former tobacco market city livable and attractive. **above:** The student-run Emerge Gallery lends an artistic flair to the city.

A Boomtown Reborn

City leaders and representatives of Uptown Greenville, a nonprofit organization birthed in 1994, discovered the key to renovating downtown: They decided to use the resources and history of the community as a springboard for growth.

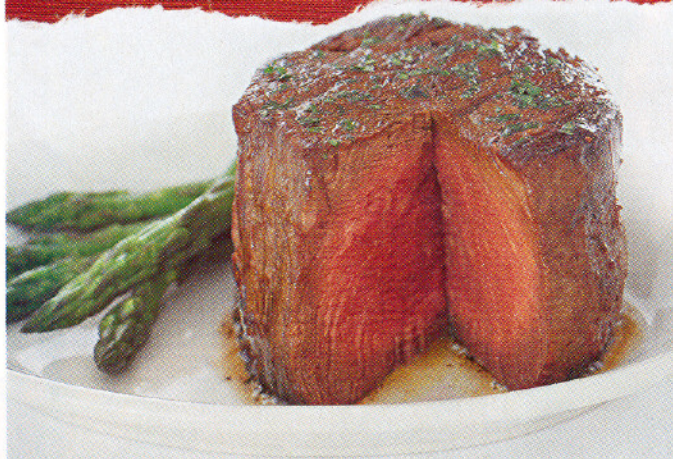
"Our intentions are not to come in and level everything and rebuild," says Mayor Don Parrott. "That would be a disaster."

He means to re-create a downtown without losing the spirit or the Southern charm of the surrounding community. The focus is on integrating a university-oriented, residential community with mom-and-pop restaurants and locally owned galleries.

East Carolina University's part in the forward surge includes an emphasis on preserving and marketing

*Life's too short
to eat anywhere else.*

- RUTH



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above: Marie Cox, age 93, greets customers with smiles and flowers at Cox Floral Service in downtown Greenville, as she has done since 1937. **right:** Engraved bricks, paid for by donations from businesses and citizens, line the streets.



the valuable history of buildings and landmarks.

In 2003 tourism expert Dr. David Edgell, Sr., and university professors across disciplines ranging from ecology to anthropology began creating a center for sustainable tourism to bring an economic revival to downtown areas in eastern North Carolina.

"The university," says David, "is going to provide students with an education that will allow them to become hospitality and tourism managers, developers, entrepreneurs, and owners of businesses downtown and beyond."

The Price of a Mission

The City of Greenville created a master plan for downtown revitalization in the mid-1990s under the leadership of former mayor Nancy Jenkins. The major initiative of the plan was to remove the failed Evans Street Mall and build a beautiful new streetscape in the heart of the city.

Uptown Greenville stepped in, raising \$250,000 toward the project by partnering with developers and selling little pieces of downtown to anyone willing to buy. Bricks that paved the sidewalk of Evans Street went for \$100 and lampposts cost \$1,000; sidewalk planters brought in \$10,000 a piece. Today those urban fixtures bear the engraved names of donors as permanent reminders of their support.

"Any city is only as good as its central area," says the current mayor, Don Parrot, who, in his two years in office has made downtown a priority.

The city put forth almost \$500,000, issuing more

than \$50,000 in grants to business owners to cover the costs of continued renovation. In the past year, Greenville added a \$500,000 amphitheater to the Town Commons, and the courthouse and library both underwent pricey face-lifts.

Road to the Future

A 12-block district of rich, post-World War I architecture nestles around the Greenville Museum of Art. All of downtown reflects that historic feel, as clothing stores and law firms revive the old buildings. Those who dreamed of seeing the Emerald City restored for the next generation now watch as it blossoms.

"Downtown belongs to everybody," says Don Edwards, president of Uptown Greenville and owner of a myriad of new stores and buildings in town, including the University Book Exchange, a major shopping locale for students.

Don, who is heavily involved in fund-raising and construction efforts, next wants to see an old theater renovated and a science museum built to draw families into the city center on weekends.

Candace Pearce, historic preservationist, contractor, and a director of Uptown Greenville, believes the

"It's exciting to see the potential and to be part of that spark."

Holly Garriott, East Carolina University graduate student and director of the Emerge Gallery

road that leads to downtown is the same road that leads to the future. "Greenville's a little town that got big," she says. And it's only getting bigger. In the coming years, she envisions a community that will thrive not only economically, but also socially due to the character of the area.

The View From Downtown

At the Starlight Café, students order gourmet sandwiches, while businesspeople read newspapers over steaming cups of coffee. Owners Alan and Susan Boutilier located the café in a former department store. "It was in pretty rough shape when we came," says Alan, "but both of us decided we wanted to be downtown."

The Emerge Gallery, an art mainstay run entirely by students, opened in 2001. "It's exciting to see the potential," says gallery director and East Carolina University graduate student Holly Garriott, "and to be part of that spark."

A decade ago, the people of Greenville told a different story about their old downtown. But today, as the sun sets, people walking along Evans Street take their places at restaurant tables or peruse clothing stores. Neon signs blink on, lighting the way to a new downtown. ALLISON BARNES

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